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## **Multiple protagonist films: a transcultural everyday practice**

Tröhler, Margrit

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MARGRIT TRÖHLER

## Multiple Protagonist Films A Transcultural Everyday Practice<sup>1</sup>

*What do such large loose baggy monsters,  
with their queer elements of the accidental  
and the arbitrary, artistically mean?*

Henry James<sup>2</sup>

Henry James's question refers to novels like William Makepeace Thackeray's *The Newcomes* (1855), Alexandre Dumas's *Les trois mousquetaires* (1844), and Leo Tolstoi's *War and Peace* (1868). The literary scholar Peter Garrett considers James's question to present a general challenge to the integrity of the typically large and multifarious nineteenth-century novel, especially the Victorian novel.<sup>3</sup> While my essay focuses upon contemporary film, its narrative, media and cultural specificity, and its characters, the *multiplot* has long challenged all the narrative arts. In order to understand how a *multiplot* affects narratives or, more specifically, a narrative organised in terms of a multiple protagonist constellation, we must first revisit the traditional pattern which, at least in Western narrative traditions, has been predominant since the Enlightenment and the development of a modern notion of the subject. To this day, the model of the individual main character has prevailed in literature, the theatre, and film throughout the various historical paradigms in both theory and practice, even though it occurs in contingent variants. Thus, an individual

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1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2003 SCMS Conference in London. I am grateful to John Orr, Carrie Tarr, Glenn Man, and Samuel Ben Israel for their helpful comments.

2 James, Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (1934), quoted from Garrett: *Multiplot*, p. 1

3 Ibid. Much the same could be said about French Realism in the second half of the nineteenth century; see Hamon: *Le personnel*.

(male) hero organises the *character constellation* through a hierarchy of values, vertically so to speak: he stands at the apex of a pyramid or at the centre of a solar system while grouped around him are secondary main characters, actual minor characters, background or ornamental figures, and extras or supernumeraries.<sup>4</sup> As regards the dynamic development of the narration, as seen horizontally, this hero assumes the function of a protagonist who focuses the narrative *upon* himself and his actions, and places them in perspective *through* his world of experience and sometimes explicitly through his perception.<sup>5</sup> Nor does this change *a priori* if the scale of values is turned upside down, as in the modern form of the anti-hero where even a villain or a failure can function as a hero or main character, since the textual mirroring of the crisis of the subject and of social values remains oriented towards the individual.<sup>6</sup> In terms of narrative technique, this prototypical model rests upon a dual basic structure that assigns the narrative engine to two ›roles‹ and organises them in a conflictual or complementary ›pair‹ (Greimas's actantial model speaks of ›sujet‹ and ›anti-sujet‹, which corresponds to Propp's ›hero‹ and ›false hero‹).<sup>7</sup> However, this structure tends towards reduction and closure in a single, unified entity, either through excluding two rivals, or through uniting opposites as a pair of friends, or indeed through merging the pair of lovers in a happy ending – under male dominance.

As regards the *character conception* of the individual hero, that is, of the two-protagonist structure, in realistic texts, this meets the requirements of a psychologically ›round character‹. In contrast to the less important, ›flat characters‹ or ›types‹,<sup>8</sup> this emphasises the singularity and complexity of the individual. Round characters appear as a conglomerate or bundle of ›distinguishing features‹, and they can always spring a surprise.<sup>9</sup> Although embedded in the entire network of figures, as a main protagonist such a character centres the narrative dynamics through his activities or inner conflicts. He also subjects the interaction with the other characters in a given constellation to his development. In its radical formulation, this model seems to apply only to male heroes, since a heroine or female main character appears to shape a character constellation less hierarchically and

4 On character terminology, see Tröhler / Taylor: Personnage; on forms of character organisation in fictional worlds, see further Gardies: Récit, pp. 53–68; Doležel: Heterocosmica, pp. 96–112; Eder: Figur, pp. 464–520.

5 Genette: Figures, pp. 183–224; Eder: Figur, pp. 561–646.

6 Vanoye: Scénarios, pp. 46–58; Wulff: Held.

7 Greimas: Actants; Propp: Morphologie.

8 Forster: Aspects, pp. 67–112.

9 Lévi-Strauss: Anthropologie, pp. 162, 170.; Lotman: Struktur, p. 356.

less centripetally from the outset, instead moulding it in more relational terms.

The following criteria thus characterise in *prototypical* and *gradual* terms the narrative dynamics and perception of *individual main characters* or »pairs«: such protagonists dominate the (deep) structure of the semantic-logical plot functions (whether considered as »actants«, in Greimas's terms, or as »roles« in Propp's). They determine which perspective is placed upon a narrative (thus influencing what spectators are able to see and know), function as social or symbolic nodes in the organisation of the fictional world, and form power centres. They as such often assume heroic status, especially as male characters, thereby activating axiological, moral, or even mythical values. In the case of an argumentative narrative stance, they are thus predestined to appear as the author's mouthpiece (and alter ego). In qualitative and quantitative terms, moreover, they assume a dominant textual, that is, onscreen presence, and attract considerable attention – not only as stage or screen stars who play off their socio-cultural image. Their characters are more strongly elaborated than those of other figures. They function as what is customarily known as a role model. They are the most sympathetic and disliked figures, and bind the emotional perception on the part of both the audience and the other characters.<sup>10</sup> Within the classical-realistic approach, they epitomise the individual psychological conception of an autonomous subject either as an indivisible being whose body and soul are one, or instead as a problematic figure in crisis that has emerged alongside the self-contained subject since modernity.

Obviously, no single main character hardly ever comprises all these various aspects, as modern heroes are not unbroken figures. Some, however, are mutually dependent (for example the morally positive hero and the narrative's main character), while others can be deconstructed without, however, questioning the centering function of one or two protagonists.

Thus, if this dominant pattern of individual main characters favours a dual basic structure and a temporal-causal, psychologically motivated orientation of the narration towards compromise, multiple protagonist constellations by contrast develop *another logic of narration* from the outset. While some of the above factors can become important in the latter constellation – sometimes even only temporarily – and can render obvious the diverse hierarchies between characters, they do not suffice to establish proper main characters or heroes. Decentering forces as such undermine the causal logic of the plot and the conception of the main characters as

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10 Smith: Engaging; Eder: Figur, pp. 647–706.

motivated by individual psychology. Moreover, the horizontal and vertical interrelation of the individual with the overall constellation becomes foregrounded. Such plural patterns already occur before the birth of the cinema in literature and in the theatre, either as isolated cases or more cumulatively as part of certain trends (various realistic or ideological-militant concerns come to mind) or historical periods (such as the Victorian and nineteenth-century French novel), as well as within certain more favoured genres (comedy, melodrama).<sup>11</sup> Three heuristic dramaturgical patterns can be observed in this respect. First, the *group character*: as a collective entity, this integrates the individual via a central idea more or less stringently into a large and sometimes differentiated assembled character, and structures the narrative through a dynamics tending towards argumentation or demonstration. Secondly, the *character ensemble*: this delineates a heterogeneous group, which develops individual roles and values in a shared polyphonic space and installs a flattened narrative style. Thirdly, the *character mosaic*: no longer constituting an actual group as such, this pattern instead relates characters in an acentric fashion through networks, chain reactions, and other labyrinthine dynamics, sometimes also dispensing with these, so that the characters actually never meet in the fictional world whereas readers and spectators can perceive them as interrelated. While the transitions between these three models are smooth, they remain nevertheless distinct in terms of the individual's relation with the group. Notwithstanding manifold variants and variations, their common feature is that they do not function axiologically (with the exception of the radical form of the collective), but rather typologically or even topographically, since they pursue a shift of emphasis from the temporal to the spatial. Moreover, they are committed less to individual characterisations and binary structured positions than to relational dynamics and a variable narrative perspective. Also, they favour flatness,

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<sup>11</sup> Besides the above-mentioned novels, see also William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595/96), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), Honoré de Balzac's *La comédie humaine* (from 1829), Victor Hugo's *Les misérables* (1862), Émile Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871–93), Thomas Mann's *Die Buddenbrooks* (1901), Anton Čechov's *Der Kirschgarten*, along the lines of the revolutionary mass theatre from the mid-1910s or John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* (1925), Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans* (1925), Vicki Baum's *Menschen im Hotel* (1929), André Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs* (1925), André Malraux's *La condition humaine* (1933), as well as thereafter works by Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Dylan Thomas, Wolfgang Koeppen, Irmtraud Morgner, Peter Nichols, Rosetta Loy, Harry Mathews, Irina Liebmann, Dominique Barbéris, Dieter Forte, Ingo Schulze, Kathrin Schmidt, and many others.

flow, the differentiation of values, and the open-ended negotiation of contradictions.

As an alternative to the pattern of the individual hero, these multiple protagonist constellations have also existed since earliest cinema. On the basis of political concerns or aesthetic movements, such diverse, expressly plural dynamics became quite common in feature films and documentaries, for example in the 1920s (for instance, in city symphonies or in Russian Revolution films), after the Second World War (for instance, in the Neorealist *film corale*), or in the 1970s. By no means is the occurrence of such dynamics limited to a national context or the stylistic demands of a certain school. Over the past fifty years, especially postcolonial narratives have reactivated and varied the collective pattern in literature, the theatre, and film, whereas increasingly less use of this particular pattern has been made in the Western world. Even though this ideological model seems to be anchored more obviously in concrete historical and discursive contexts than the other two models are, no single standard implementation has asserted itself. Even though the other two dramaturgies – which are mostly prevalent in the Western world – are contingent upon social and discursive formations, they cannot be reduced wholesale to a questioning of the Western subject that would transfer the modernist experience of ambivalence and postmodern arbitrariness and exchangeability of values.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the various plural dramaturgies and their concrete manifoldness make ever different cultural statements in specific historical, discursive, and intermedia constellations; they circulate synchronically in global narrative contexts and return diachronically in waves, as witnessed recently.

### 1 Multiple Protagonist Films: A Global Vernacular Practice

Since the late 1980s, so-called Independent Cinema across the world has tended increasingly towards narratives with no single main character. Such »multiple protagonist films« present their many-faceted stories by embedding their characters either in group-dynamic or mosaic-like constellations. Various examples of group-dynamic films come to mind: *Life According to Agfa* (*Ha Chayim Aphy Agfa*, Assi Dayan, Israel 1992), *Bhaji on the Beach* (Gurinder Chada, GB 1993), *À La vie, à la mort* (Robert Guédiguian, F 1995), *Ice Storm* (Ang Lee, USA 1996), *Made in Hong Kong*

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12 On the interrelation between the notion of the individual subject and the Modernist and Postmodernist paradigms in Western theory formation, see Zima 2000.

(*Xianggang Zhiao*, Fruit Chan, Hong Kong 1997), *Festen* (Thomas Vinterberg, DK 1998), *Flowers of Shanghai* (*Hai shang hua*, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Taiwan 1998), *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, Canada/USA 1998) *La Ciénaga* (Lucrecia Martel, Argentina/F/E 2001) or *Elephant* (Gus Van Sant, USA 2003). Mosaic-films include, among others, *Slacker* (Richard Linklater, USA 1991), *Short Cuts* (Robert Altman, USA 1993), *Beijing Bastards* (*Beijing Zadhong*, Zhang Yuan, China 1993), *71 Fragmente einer Chronologie des Zufalls* and *Code inconnu* (Michael Haneke, A/D 1994; F 2000), *Les Voleurs* (André Téchiné, F 1996), *Magnolia* (Paul Thomas Anderson, USA 2000), *The Circle* (*Le Dayereh*, Jafar Panahi, Iran/I 2000), *Amores Perros* and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, Mexico 1999; F/USA/Mexico 2006). Both types of the multiple protagonist film – group-dynamic as well as mosaic-films, which I will not discuss in detail here – unfold various dramatic compositions within a weakly causal, decentered pattern of narration by establishing through parallelism and simultaneity a spatial, often urban network. Their topological and meandering constructions often present everyday worlds that delineate an open set of value-based, emotional positions through adopting a chronicling, polyfocalised narrative stance. Such films thus produce what I would call an *expressive, ethnographic realism*. Characters and their constellations play a key role in understanding such realism and its genesis.<sup>13</sup>

While such narrative patterns also appear before the 1990s, as mentioned, they have become more frequent in the last fifteen to twenty years. Moreover, it seems legitimate to speak of a transcultural phenomenon, since decentered or acentric modes of representation, and their particular expressive opportunities, emerge at the same time in various places, genres, and formats – and also in other media such as literature, theatre and dance performances, photography, radio plays, and the graphic arts.

Rapid technological development over the past twenty years has affected not only art and everyday life, including how we cope with visuals and the flow of images, but also media carriers and dispositives. Even if single media formats develop their own specific visibilities, stylistic forms, and narrative dynamics, based on their pragmatic conditions and technical possibilities, their forms of address and their structural modes of presentation and of reception tend to come together. While such a tendency to »media convergence« does not describe a new development, it nevertheless seems to have been heightened and in particular accelerated by technological innovation, postmodern pastiche, global circulation, and

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13 About contemporary tendencies of realism see also Orr: Directions.

the individual appropriation of media productions.<sup>14</sup> Our contingent manner of dealing with images can be understood as a practice that effects the mutual interaction between production and reception, and embeds films in an intermedia context of reciprocal influence or transmission.

Writing about Hollywood cinema of the 1920s and 30s and beyond, Miriam Hansen has established the somewhat paradoxical term »vernacular modernism« and refers to such films as a »global vernacular«.<sup>15</sup> She argues that American films and their distinctive national-cultural (and regional) features, which actually defy universalisation, are becoming polymorphous vehicles in concrete pragmatic contexts of sensory appropriation: since American values and views have different meanings in different historical reception situations and cultures, these popular media products are confronted with existing traditional ties, varying aesthetic sensibilities, and various forms of adaptation amid their transcultural circulation. In no other way could Hollywood have otherwise managed to attain, and maintain to this day, its aesthetic and economic hegemony.

Even though the boundaries between Hollywood and Independent productions have become more permeable, and the patterns of the latter rub off on the former (such as in Stephan Gaghan's *Syriana*, USA 2005), transcultural multiple protagonist films and their new realism can definitely not be considered serious economic competition for Hollywood, as little as they can undermine its »geopolitical aesthetic«.<sup>16</sup> Put differently, multiple protagonist films are as such *one* form of what can be perceived and expressed at a particular time in a particular culture, proceeding in a »multidirectional flow of aesthetic ideas«, as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have suggested.<sup>17</sup> However, such independent productions are made in isolation, but across the world – particularly in Europe, Asia, North, and Central America. Various parallel structures exist today that have the features of a »global vernacular« on account of the above mentioned media convergence. Therefore, I would argue that the

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14 Elsaesser: Cinema.

15 Hansen: Production, pp. 333, 340.

16 Jameson: Aesthetic.

17 Shohat / Stam: Narrativizing, p. 39. Other non-linear dynamics exist alongside strongly present, canonised forms. These alternative forms develop a lower-level expressive ethnographic realism than the multiple protagonist films discussed here, and instead emphasise the structural aspect: they could be called »meta-cinema« and sometimes violently challenge our perceptual conventions of space and time; see, for instance, David Lynch's films, Wong Kar Wai's *2046* (China, France, Germany, Hong Kong 2004), or Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (USA 2000). See Orr: Directions; Orr: Worlds; Cameron: Contingency; Branigan: Plots.



transcultural and transmedia nature of such films and of their specific realism attests to an attention to the everyday, challenging vernacular practice to negotiate an encounter with the social and/or cultural Other. In the course of the ethnographic turn, whose emergence Hal Foster identifies in artistic production and cultural theory since the late 1980s, such attention to the everyday has also reached the mass media where it flowers differently.<sup>18</sup>

Hence, the new filmic ethnographic realism can be related to fictionalising everyday reportage, reality formats, and family soaps shown on television on the one hand, and the widespread everyday use of (digital) photographic and video cameras and the accessibility and circulation of such images on the Internet on the other. New shooting and editing technology as well as digital imaging and image production now pervade the most diverse media practices. Their straightforward handling, for both professional and private purposes, has also brought forth a new aesthetic sensibility and attitude towards everyday gestures. On the other hand, the particular structural organisation of customary interactive dispositives like computers, the Internet and DVD acts upon feature films and documentaries, promoting a new flexibility in image linking as well as the linking of images with the human voice, music, and language. Such linkage and integration is not in itself narrative; but if we conceive narrative in open terms – that is, in terms of postclassical theory –, we discover new narrative dynamics,<sup>19</sup> which every medium and all media formats configure for their economic, socio-cultural, and aesthetic concerns. In what follows, I discuss such narrative dynamics, which combine a new sensitivity towards the everyday with particular forms of linkage. While I focus on the feature film, these reflections also hold true for more general developments in media.

This essay thus discusses the dynamics of multiple protagonist films and their expressive, ethnographic realism as a vernacular practice. However, it offers no detailed analysis of character constellations, concrete forms of montage, authorial traces, and generic relations.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it opens up a broader view of multiple protagonist films, and suggests how they might be conceived as a transcultural phenomenon. I am particularly interested in two aspects: first, the range of meanings and the palette of emotional positions that these films establish and bring into

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18 Foster: *Real*, pp. 171–203.

19 Such new dynamics are adapted and transformed in turn by narratives in film, see e.g. Thanouli: *Cinema*; Kovács: *Things*; Smith: *Lines*. See also footnote 10.

20 Tröhler: *Welten*.

transnational circulation by devising a narrative iconography of everyday social life; and secondly, the audience activities that these heavily character-centered films imply. Here, I will focus on the potential imaginary activities of cooperative spectators, who embrace the opportunities that an open, polycentric form provides.<sup>21</sup> One of my working assumptions is that while these transnationally circulating films delineate everyday worlds that anchor them in the local and the specific, their body images, social dynamics, and weakly causal narrative forms are nonetheless conceived almost everywhere as everyday life.

## 2 Images of the Everyday and Analogical Linking

Expressive, ethnographic realism emerges as a two-level, effect-bearing construction: the first level is a *fictional, diegetic* model of everyday life, which is rendered more dynamic and cast into narrative on a second level through an *analogical, associative mode of linkage*. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *Chronotope*, and combining it with a critical reading of Erwin Panofsky's notion of *Iconology* to include the (audio-)visual, I assume that multiple protagonist films project a *fictional image* of the everyday.<sup>22</sup> As a possible world, this *iconographic chronotope* is subject to change through time as well as becoming differently anchored in different cultural contexts. On the level of representation, however, it remains recognisable as a fictional image of the everyday on account of various diegetic elements – and also because similar images circulate worldwide in different media forms. The everyday worlds in multiple protagonist films – Robert Altman's well-known *Short Cuts* may serve as a prototype – do not present heroes, but rather characters whose physical and psychological traits identify them as ordinary people. Based on Raymond Carver's *Selected Stories*, Altman's film features twenty-four characters in Los Angeles, whose lives intersect, some casually, some more lastingly, in a mosaic-like narrative. Each is integrated in a particular environment as well as in the social dynamics of family and friendships. Since no enunciative emphasis is placed on one or two central protagonists, symbolic power and hierarchies become apparent in the confrontation of

21 In speaking of 'cooperative spectators' here, I do not wish to spotlight the atypical forms of filmic pleasure and the obdurate and aberrant readings that enable spectators to appropriate films to their own ends or for the specific identity construction of socio-cultural groups. See Staiger: *Perverse Spectators* or Nichols: *Film Theory*; Ezra / Rowden: *Transnational Cinema*.

22 Tröhler: *Welten*, pp. 213–234.

social worlds. These are situated entirely in the ›contingency‹, that is, in the nonsimultaneity of simultaneities, which Bakhtin considered typical of the ›chronotope of meeting‹.<sup>23</sup> Even if these encounters are sometimes not effective, but only perceptible to spectators as co-occurring in the same image or the same diegetic place, they are nevertheless conditioned by the social interrelations of the characters, coincidences, and incidents involved in representing the eventfulness of fictional everyday worlds in a spatial, horizontal mesh. Through their selection of figures and the limits of the network of relations, they represent what is obviously an ordinary social stratum. The narrative perspective coincides with a chronicler's attitude of furnishing a socio-political description of this microcosm.<sup>24</sup> External *focalisation* (in Gérard Genette's sense)<sup>25</sup> depicts the characters of multiple protagonist films as social types inhabiting social roles and located in a polyphonic space. Individual characters attain individuality, psychological depth, and complexity mostly through (often conflict-laden) interaction with other characters. As spectators, we observe their behaviour, errors, and twists and turns. Through their encounters, gestures, and attributes, everyday body images emerge to create a relational dynamics enhanced by an expressive style of acting, which – as so often in Altman's films – stands to one side of character delineation in a somewhat self-reflexive manner. Everything has to be exteriorised (by the actors and the film's aesthetic and structural dynamics), and is carried into a network of interrelated emotions, intentions, and personal histories. Subjectivity arises on the polyphonic, dazzling surface, revealing a character conception that delineates a multi-faceted social and *relational subject* with strong somatic conditioning. As the philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels has shown, such a dialogical conception of the subject arises only in contention, and in conflict, with the Other.<sup>26</sup>

Besides these social dynamics, narration evolves through an alternating, meandering form of montage. This lends support not only to the parallelism (similarities and differences) between the characters in the fictional world, but creates further polyphonic references and relations between the various worlds through aesthetico-plastic moments of image-composition. References and relations, moreover, can be generated by colour relations, movements, the scales of takes, the repetition of gestures, situations, noises, or musical leitmotifs, etc. Notwithstanding the depiction

23 Bakhtin: *Zeit*, pp. 23–25; Bakhtin: *Time*, pp. 98–100.

24 Vanoye: *Scénarios*, pp. 74–77.

25 Genette: *Figures*, pp. 206–211; see also Genette: *Discours*, pp. 48–52.

26 Waldenfels: *Stachel*, pp. 43–82; see also Zima: *Theorie*, chap. V.

of the everyday, enunciative activities are very noticeable at both the *expressive* and self-reflective levels. (Fredric Jameson observes that all realisms since modernity attest to the paradoxical quest for self-reflexive authenticity).<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, the flow that multiple protagonist films constitute pursues some dominant lines of association, whose absence would prevent narration. And yet these lines – generally tied to and directed by character activities – leave open a complexity of possible connections through a polysemy of images and junctures that differentiates the fictional image of the everyday even further. Even if the overriding plot dynamics appear to be more or less steered and remain more or less open-ended (for example, in Jacques Rivette's films) or closed (for example, in Altman), such associative interrelation, which integrates semantic and formal moments, follows the logical principles of comparison that Barbara Maria Stafford terms »visual analogy«. She notes that »most fundamentally, analogy is the vision of ordered relationships articulated as similarity-in-difference. This order is neither facilely affirmative nor purchased at the expense of variety«.<sup>28</sup> She also observes: »This human conjunctive faculty is simultaneously individual and global, specific and general, capable of engendering figures of differentiation and reconciliation«.<sup>29</sup>

Now obviously I am not assuming that this narrative iconography of the everyday is universal: neither are social configurations like families or partnerships, and their conflicts, uniform, transcultural factors, nor is the way in which things are connected and the world made sense of as a result. But the relational, social dynamics that become apparent on the surface of the filmic world provide open constructions, as do the weakly causal, polysemous, and playful dramaturgies of multiple protagonist films taken by themselves. Their expressive, ethnographic realism is at once akin to everyday actions and images of the social Other, as well as aligned with the foreignness of the cultural Other, that is, the recognisable specifics of a socio-politically rooted microcosm.

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27 Jameson: *Signatures*, p. 165. Here, I prefer expressivity to self-reflexivity, since my description of expressive ethnographic realism centres on the quasi-phenomenological, world-constituting presence of the audiovisual stream and its affective qualities: film is expression in the first instance and provokes the presentness of media before it means or conveys something – not even on a meta-discursive level, or as Metz puts it: »Le cinéma, comme les arts et parce qu'il en est un, [est] un moyen d'expression beaucoup plus que de communication.« (Metz: *Essais*, p. 79).

28 Stafford: *Analogy*, p. 9.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 142.

Analogical linkage connects social and aesthetic moments. We are familiar with such linkage as a structural dynamics from both well-established and more recent everyday practices and current discourses on networks. Various illustrative cases come to mind: the operating principles involved in kinship and friendship affiliations, for instance, or the labyrinthine courses that group conversations take, gameplaying practices, surfing the net, and trying to understand the circulation of information in today's globalised world. I would assume that such familiar associative structures, anchored in a realistic and at the same time self-reflexive everyday world, enables confrontation with the social and cultural Other through the shifts and comparisons involved in the analogical processes brought into play by the ›similarity-in-difference‹ principle.

### 3 Emotional and Structural Activities of Involvement

I would now like to consider multiple protagonist films in terms of cinema audience activities. Devising a model of audience activity is a complex matter that calls for a flexible theoretical foundation; I will not propose such model here, but merely delineate some salient lines concerning the emotional and structural aspects of spectatorial involvement in multiple protagonist films. While this will amount somewhat to ›bricolage‹, it will undoubtedly leave gaps and even spark controversy.

The analogical thinking that multiple protagonist films evoke as regards their spectators' interpretive opportunities thus connects social and aesthetic moments in a cohesive, audiovisual flux. Or as Stafford suggests: ›Perceptually combined information not only avoids the intellectual limitations of linearity but reveals our constant involvement in heterogeneous reasoning‹.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the narrative construction of an audience position shuttles between proximity and distance: on the one hand, the proximity of the chronicle-like presentation of a fictional everyday world in which the characters appear to represent themselves through their body images; on the other, a distance established by the reflexivity of actor performance, the process of montage, and general filmic expressivity betrays the intrusion and control of an omnipresent enunciative authority. On this level, I would assume that spectators are led into a collage-like process of understanding that operates along the lines of Charles Sanders

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30 Ibid., p. 144.

Peirce's principle of »abduction«<sup>31</sup> it gathers the distinct partial worlds into a hypothetical whole, designing the microcosm as an ornamental web, that remains in constant motion and is (time and again) adjusted to the relational web. Notwithstanding the dominant line of association, given by the linear course of narration, spectators are nonetheless required to assume an active role in the signifying process, involving them in observation, recognition, combination, comparison, and evaluation. These activities, in turn, imply two interlocking levels of analogy: first, a semantic-fictional, diegetic level of worldmaking, and secondly, a structural one that concerns analogical linkage. Both attend upon the vernacular aspect of multiple protagonist films and their specific spectatorial engagement.

As regards the first aspect, I draw upon the work of the French social psychologist Denise Jodelet who argues that we summon these activities in what she calls »social comparison«.<sup>32</sup> To assess »social objects« that unlike material ones primarily elude interpretation in terms of physical, objective criteria (such as form, colour, composition), we compare the appearance, manner, and skills of our fellow human beings with our own self-image – at least in Western cultures. We thus situate ourselves in the social mesh in relation to others. While such comparison reveals small distinctions, it works only with those whom we consider sufficiently similar to ourselves.<sup>33</sup> Obviously, dealing with the everyday characters in the fictional everyday worlds of the cinema or television in a dialogic manner is possible only in an imaginary sense, since social comparison in everyday life always rests upon direct interaction and feedback (which helps explain why we fail to mistake the difference between fiction and reality). I take it that the heightened position of observation in front of the screen – supported by the external focalisation of a chronicling narrative stance – leads spectators to apply similar criteria to compare characters in their relational dynamics. Put differently, we are attracted to some, and repelled by others – according to their social and individual affinities for gendered and/or ethnic identity, age, class, and so forth. Jodelet has also pointed

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31 »Abduction« occurs in the interplay between intuitive assumption (hypothesis), analysing the individual case (that is, variants), and theory- or model-building in infinite semiosis. Originally devised by Charles Sanders Peirce, the concept has been developed further as a methodological procedure as well as a semiotic and cognitive process, among others by Umberto Eco (*Grenzen*) and Peter Wuss (*Filmanalyse*); see also Nöth: *Handbuch*, pp. 67–70.

32 Jodelet: *Le corps*, p. 52; here, she makes reference to Louis Festinger's *A Theory of social comparison process* (1954).

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 52.

out that personal experience as well as social or cultural notions – which also comprise self-images and notions of the body images of others – always enter such emotional and evaluative comparison.<sup>34</sup> In film, we might accept that character design influences the appraisal of others as regards their outer appearance, through the casting of actors and the body images they project in their performances as well as through mise-en-scène and other aesthetic factors.

At least in Western societies, it appears that we often deduce a person's values from their appearance; in doing so, we often mistakenly make causal and moralising attributions. Following Léon Beauvois and Nicole Dubois, we could assume on this quasi-phenomenological level of interpreting fictional everyday worlds that audiences attribute significant responsibility to individuals for their behaviour and actions. Such interpretation is based on the illusion of the individual's control and self-determination, and neglects environmental factors.<sup>35</sup>

In the relational dynamics of multiple protagonist films, however, the strongly interactional narrative dynamics continuously call into question what Hans J. Wulff has termed the »operations of attribution« involved in assessing individuals.<sup>36</sup> As the network of relations unfolds, established patterns of perception and explanation are constantly displaced by multifaceted, social character delineation and by the narrative dynamics dealing with coincidences, incidences, and accidents to provoke encounters or failed rendezvous. Causal attributions of values and the emotions bound up with such attributions are often led astray, laying bare the everyday and the non-comprehension it involves, that is, partial or mistaken understanding.<sup>37</sup> On balance, this calls for revising old patterns and drawing new comparisons.

Along these lines, I would argue that spectators can project themselves into an *imaginary circle of friends and acquaintances*. As spectators, we can gradually sympathise with or disapprove of the various members of the group or mosaic constellation. Through the ornamental network of social and aesthetic relations, and the relational distribution of values, where we negotiate an emotional, intellectual, and moral position in respect, for example, of family or group hierarchies, ethnic imputations, and the distribution of gender-related roles and their performances.

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34 Jodelet: *Représentation*, p. 127.

35 Beauvois / Dubois: *Croyances*, pp. 164–169.

36 Wulff: *Attribution*, pp. 57–59; Wulff draws upon the social psychologist Fritz Heider: »The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations« (1958).

37 Zerbst: *Fiktion*, p. 59.

In Assi Dayan's *Life According to Agfa*, for instance, the specific narrative perspective introduces us primarily to the core group – the bar staff and regulars, who all bring along their stories to the Tel Aviv-based venue (and who are introduced partly through scenes set in additional locations). We observe several conflictual relationships, among others between Liora, the barkeeper, and her partner, who pretends to tackle drug dealers without compromise, but instead allows himself to be corrupted and moreover deceives Liora. Nevertheless, he regains part of our sympathy when he defends a Palestinian scullion, who is fully integrated into the group, against the abuse of several soldiers who have landed up in the bar by chance. However, this is merely one of several lines in the complex field of emotional relations in which we must continuously adjust our position. Through our narrative and social proximity to the core group, which moreover is focused on and by Liora, we distance ourselves both ideologically and morally not only from the group of soldiers and their commanding officer, but also from the three quarrelsome Arab drug addicts who heat up the conflicts in the bar even more. Although *Life According to Agfa* does not pursue a militant line of argument – as the collective constellation mostly does – and although we establish different or partly even dismissive relations to the members of the heterogeneous core group, we nevertheless become involved not only in the emotional conflicts waged by the various couples, but also in the social and political conflicts, and towards which we must adopt an imaginary stance. We thus exclude the ›rivals‹ of the core group from the circle of friends and acquaintances in which *Life According to Agfa* involves us.

As regards the second, structural aspect of analogical thinking, I wish to return to the above associative dynamics. These serve not only to integrate the characters in social formations, but also establish relations between whatever else is perceived. The relations emerging on the audiovisual surface allow us to link or distinguish atmospheres through colours, camera movements, sounds, music, and finally montage. This concerns loose or vague, often unclear cohesion between heterogeneous elements, fragmentary ideas, expressive nuances, sensuous moments, all inscribed in the audiovisual surface of everyday (fictional) scenes. The fluid nature of these playful dynamics does not follow a centering, vectorising thread, neither in narrative nor argumentative or thematic-descriptive terms. Their plastic-associative logic, which holds together the fictional part-worlds like mosaic stones, arises from the bodily expressiveness of the characters and actors (that is, the acting style), and the particular expressive qualities of a film. Often, the characters themselves function as plastic elements: while they are not conspicuous enough to explode the narrative, they remain nonetheless visible and audible, noticeable on the surface, absorbed by



movements and encounters in the everyday, diegetic world, and perceptible as enunciative and self-reflexive creative instances, and so they influence the emotional and haptic reception of the film while indicating new conceptual relationships.

Seen from a critical, rational standpoint, understanding based on analogy – and induction as a procedure common to all empirical sciences – is afforded some degree of validity through confirmation, but never certainty. Predictions, based on the singular and clawing their way from one instance to the next via comparable, provisional conclusions, to account for a certain probability, are not valid as logical deduction and fail to legitimate the assumption of ›lawlikeness‹.<sup>38</sup> However, if we assume that no universal law exists to establish links neither between things nor images, but that coupling and making associations is itself inevitable if one is to find one's bearings in the world and create meaning, these playful forms of expression reveal relational patterns that recall a familiar and yet strange (because mostly not consciously reflected) order; that of the nonverbal and everyday action, which manifests itself in the (culturally specific) fictional world and on the filmic surface; its organisational forms materialise in the media dynamics only to change, and combine to form new statements.

Ideally, this form of integration in fictional, aesthetically designed worlds might even result in spectators examining their own social self-image. Various kinds of cultural practices (including the handling of media images) are part of identity constructions and narrative patterns that have their share in how societies represent themselves and how these societies are perceived by others. Stafford makes a similar point: »How we couple representations in space is the key to understanding selfhood. The activity of linking has an emotional component, fitting our desires to an expanding universe of events in which both self and others are mutually transformed«. Furthermore: »Because it is not preblended, braiding collage obliges us to see ourselves mentally laboring to combine many shifting and conflicting perceptions into a unified representation«.<sup>39</sup>

In any event, I would argue that comparison and integration often enable spectators to engage in more differentiated ways with the social and cultural Other. Not that this amounts to claiming that multiple protagonist films always deal explicitly with the clash of cultures or conflicts with the foreign: they include this in their iconography of the everyday only insofar as the excerpt of the socially anchored microcosm

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38 Goodman: *Riddle*, esp. pp. 32–37; see also Goodman: *Strictures*.

39 Stafford: *Analogy*, pp. 141–142.

and its depiction of the quotidian permit it. Nonetheless, the emergence of multiple protagonist films in different countries, together with their transnational circulation, offers insight into the fictional design of the everyday in films made, for instance, in Mexico, Israel, China, the USA, or in Europe. These films transport images of the everyday, which are perceived in the entire effort such poetic translation involves. They make sense in transnational terms while remaining shaped by the specific traits of another society's social and political problems, manifesting themselves in the audiovisual design of such films. The transition from the social to the cultural Other is fluid in such everyday worlds, presuming a notion of culture such as that suggested by the ethnopschoanalyst Mario Erdheim: »Culture is what arises from dealing with the foreign; it represents the outcome of how the assimilation of the foreign changes the local and the self.«<sup>40</sup>

Analogical networking and negotiating value-based, emotional positions offers spectators various ways of integrating themselves in multiple protagonist films, thereby rendering tangible (and enabling) confrontation with the cultural Other. Multiple protagonist films of the 1990s can be conceived as a popular or vernacular cultural practice on a quasi-transnational level. As I mentioned at the beginning, they can be considered part of what Hal Foster calls the »ethnographic turn«, in that a narrative and iconographic pragmatic everyday knowledge has arisen together with the worldwide circulation of images of the everyday and the ordinary, the increasing mobility of individuals, and the ever more widespread use of participatory media, such as photographic and video cameras, or the internet, and the technical possibilities they provide. This general tendency towards the »ethnographisation of society« through media has become apparent in multiple protagonist films,<sup>41</sup> particularly in their chronicling attitude (located between participation and observation) and their analogical dynamics of linking which lead to the confrontation of the self and the foreign in the local and the present.<sup>42</sup>

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40 Erdheim: *Das Eigene*, p. 734: »Kultur ist das, was in der Auseinandersetzung mit dem Fremden entsteht, sie stellt das Produkt der Veränderung des Eigenen durch die Aufnahme des Fremden dar« (trans. by M.K.).

41 Oester: *Le tournant*, p. 347.

42 Trans. by Mark Kyburz.

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